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Let's Switch Questioning Around

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To promote deep learning, remember that students' questions matter most.

Early in the school year, I pull up next to Tomás for a quick conference. He is reading Tim O'Brien's book *The Things They Carried*. I start my conference in the usual way.

"How's your reading going?" I ask.

With eyes down at his desk he says, "OK."

"So what have you figured out?"

Abruptly, Tomás raises his head and says, "Miss, I'm not so good at answering questions. I don't know a lot."

"What do you mean you don't know a lot?" I ask.

Quietly, he replies, "Whenever teachers ask me questions, I can't answer them."

"Well," I said, "let's switch things around. Why don't you ask the questions?"

"Me," he says incredulously. "What do you mean?"

"Yes, you," I say. "What questions do you have about your reading?"

Almost immediately, Tomás starts firing off things he's wondering about. "I'm confused," he says. "Sometimes the book is about the narrator being at war, and then it switches to when he is old. It's like a flashback. Are all these chapters connected, or are they like short stories?"

I smile at Tomás and say, "I think you know a lot. Maybe you've been so busy answering other people's questions that you haven't had time to work on your own." Tomás smiles and together we start to figure out how O'Brien uses time to structure *The Things They Carried*.

Thinking about my conference with Tomás, I have to wonder how his belief that he doesn't know very much affects him as a reader. Does it prevent him from asking his own questions? Does it make him more passive and encourage him to wait for the teacher to tell him what the book is about? Does it discourage him from thinking critically?

Why Do Students' Questions Matter Most?

We have trained students so well to be question answerers that by the time they reach middle school some think their job is to be mind readers. Kenneth Vogler (2008) estimates that "teachers ask about 300–400 questions per day and as many as 120 questions per hour." Researcher Susan Black (2001) reports that teachers' verbal questioning of their students is second only to teacher lecturing. Yet when students stop asking questions, they begin to abdicate responsibility for their learning. Instead, they sit back and let someone else do the thinking for them.

Don't get me wrong. There is definitely a place for teacher questioning. But most of the time, teachers ask questions they already know the answers to, leaving little space for original thought. Often, a student can get the answer by putting it into Google or SparkNotes. Asking even high-level questions doesn't necessarily mean getting high-level answers that students came up with on their own.

We are kidding ourselves if we think our questions alone turn students into critical thinkers. But if we ask students to ask questions that they care about, we get a truer sense of their understanding. It's a lot harder to fake an authentic question than it is to copy an answer from some Internet site.

Barbara Bess, whom I taught with years ago, has a motto: "The brilliance is in the question" (Tovani, 2011). One day when I was observing, I heard her say, "No one is going to cure cancer by repeating some fact that the experts already know. It will be a researcher's question that leads to a new discovery. As literature researchers, what is your question?"

Instead of spending time honing our questioning skills, it's time we help students hone theirs. Giving students opportunities to practice questioning will help them way beyond the classroom. People who wonder set a purpose for themselves. They know asking questions will propel them to continue reading and learning. Questions give learners a tool for picking out information that may be useful.

In addition, learners who ask questions are able to isolate their confusion. Questions force them to articulate what their confusion is instead of merely saying, "What? I don't get this!" Learners can then work to repair their confusion by seeking more information. Asking questions gives learners control.

When I think about the students I am preparing to run the world, I want them to seek information and articulate their confusion. I want them to be propelled to study more and to have strategies that help them stay with challenging material. What I don't want is for them to repeat information that everyone already knows—what a waste of time. I much prefer that my students tell me what they wonder so I can guide their learning.

It gets boring asking the same old questions over and over again. If I'm bored with my instruction, most likely students are bored, too. Recently, after observing one of my classes, a colleague said, "It must be nice to not have any discipline problems so you can teach." Although students occasionally act out in my room, I rarely have long-term discipline issues. It's not because I have a no-fail classroom management plan. My secret, I think, is focusing on my students' questions.

How Can I Get Students to Ask Questions?

I taught elementary school for years before becoming a high school teacher. The younger the grade, the more questions I got. Little ones are naturally curious. By the time kids reach adolescence, the love of questioning is sometimes gone. But I know that curiosity still exists inside my high school students. I just have to reawaken it.

I think the main reason older students don't ask question is fear that they may look wrong or dumb or too excited about school. Years ago, I attended a summer workshop in Denver at which Ralph Fletcher delivered a keynote about honoring the risks our students take. He said, "If the first troops that hit the beach get mowed down, no one will follow. Be careful how you respond to the first troops."

For teenagers, school can be scary and asking questions is risky, especially if you're working really hard to be cool. To avoid "mowing down" the first question askers in my room, I must respond to questions in a way that honors their risk. I have to work hard to make it safe for all questions and all questioners. Here are a few of my strategies:

- I use students' questions to drive the next day's reading. These questions often energize others to read and provide great discussion material for small-group conversations. I throw in a few of my questions, too, but I avoid asking ones that only have one right answer.
- I'm selective about the questions I answer. When students ask a clarifying question—one that starts with a who, what, when, or where—I try to answer it. I would find it difficult to ask a how or why question if I were still wondering about who, what, when, or where. When a student asks a how or why question, I try to respond with another question, such as "Why do you think that's happening?" Answering with a quick response tells the learner that the thinking is done.
- Sometimes I share my annotated text, pointing out my questions. I show students that I care about some questions more than others and remind them that some questions deserve more effort in answering than others.

What Do Student Questions Tell Me?

Students' questions provide a great deal of invaluable formative assessment data that helps me adjust instruction. For example, students' questions about a recent reading assignment shows me what students understood and gives me ideas for helping them.

The students are considering the age-old question of nature versus nurture—how does each affect a person's future? One group is reading *The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates*, a story of two men named Wes Moore who each face adverse conditions growing up. The Wes who authored the book is a successful civic leader, but the other Wes Moore is in prison for life. Readers get to contemplate the role of nature and nurture in the two men's lives.

Before I release students to read, I model how I read with the eye of a sociologist. I share a couple of events from the book and analyze whether the outcome of the event is an effect of the character's DNA or of his environment. As students read, I encourage them to jot down both their questions and their analysis regarding nature and nurture on their "think sheets," handouts I've provided for students to record their thinking as they read. I can use these sheets to give them feedback.

As students read, I circulate the room, discussing the students' questions with them individually. I don't get around to everyone during class, so I grab the think sheets from the students I didn't talk with. I start with Shyanne's. She writes, "Author Wes tells Sergeant Austin, 'I'm from the Bronx' and he says it with a lot of pride. I wonder if living in the Bronx gave him confidence to not be scared of anyone or anything. I think this has to do with nurturing." Shyanne is really thinking about this nature versus nurture concept. She asks a question but then goes on to answer it with a logical inference.

Jenny, who is failing and missing a lot of class, writes, "Why did Sergeant Austin trick author Wes into thinking he had a chance of leaving the military academy?" Her question surprises me because it shows that she is farther along in the book than the rest of her group. Maybe she is a better student than I thought. I wonder why she is reading but not doing her written work. I need to find out what she needs to get back on track.

Juan asks about something that happened 15 pages earlier, which lets me know he is behind. It's OK, though, because his question about how the two mothers' style of punishment affects each boy shows he is really reading and thinking about nature versus nurture as it relates to where he is in the book.

Adriana writes, "What if jailbird Wes had gone to a military school? Would he have turned out better?" I write back to her, "I'm not sure. I think it affected him, but we'll need to keep reading to see." Now she can think about this question as she continues reading.

Angelica, a firm believer that nature can't be changed, loves this topic and the book. She wonders where author Wes's mom got the money to pay for military school. This question propels her to keep reading. Angelica then asks, "Does the mom really believe Wes can change? Was his mom a bad kid that went to this school? Does this school eventually help him?" Angelica's questions tell me that she doesn't have a lot of knowledge about military schools. I can quickly let her know the next day that there were typically no girls at these schools when Wes's mom was young. I could also tell her what Wes's mom was like, but I won't. Instead, I will redirect her to the sections at the beginning of the book that describe author Wes's mom.

I'm humbled by my students' questions. Often, they are better than mine. I'm also thankful for their questions because they give me insight on how to differentiate instruction. If students were all answering the same teacher-generated question, I wouldn't be able to tell who got it and who copied.

What Questions Should Teachers Ask?

My students' questions matter most because they give me insight into what the students know and need. However, that doesn't mean I never get to ask any questions. With the help of my instructional coach, Samantha Bennett, I've discovered a pattern in the questions I tend to ask. Usually, my questions fall under one of two categories: questions that create awareness and questions that inform my instruction.

Questions That Create Awareness

When my friend Marci says, "Did you notice how many biblical references there are in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*? What do you think that's all about?" I don't have a quick answer. But that evening when I'm reading the novel, I pay attention. And in the next book I pick up, I look for allusions and ask myself about those as well.

When I ask students these kinds of questions, I don't expect one right answer. My goal is to spark a conversation that will expand the way students examine text. Here are a few of my favorites:

- What are you noticing about how the author is using time? Is he jumping forward, flashing back, or moving through events chronologically? What purpose do you think it serves?
- What background knowledge do you have about the book, topic, author, or characters?
- What are you wondering about the book, topic, author, or characters?
- Did you notice the title? Any ideas how it connects to the piece?
- What weird or unusual text structures are you noticing? Why do think the author structured the chapter that way?
- What predictions are you making?
- What questions do you have? Which ones do you care most about?
- Which character's perspective are you connecting to most?
- Are there any objects or colors that keep popping up?
- How could you look at this information differently?

Sometimes when I ask students questions like these, they don't have a lot to say because they need time to read with the question in mind. So I may ask them which question intrigues them most and what they want to look for as they read. This gives students ownership. It's important that I write down what intrigues them so I can touch base with them the next day

by simply asking, "Hey, Tomás, what did you figure out about O'Brien's use of time?"

Questions That Inform Instruction

When I want to find out what students know and need, I have to ask questions that give them multiple ways to respond. Their responses are entry points into their thinking and understanding. Questions like these work well:

- What do you need?
- Is this boring or are you stuck? What makes this boring? What do think is causing you to be stuck? What have you done before to get unstuck that might help you?
- Have you tried what we talked about in the minilesson?
- What's preventing you from working? What causes you to stop?
- Why do you think that?
- What might you try tomorrow?
- What do you know now that you didn't know before?
- What's going on in your head as your read? What is your inner voice saying?

In the End, What Does Matter Most?

In *A More Beautiful Question*, author Warren Berger (2014) invites us all—teachers, students, business leaders, innovators, and parents—to ignite learning by asking more beautiful questions. He writes, "In searching for common denominators among [the world's] brilliant change-makers, one thing I kept finding was that many of them were exceptionally good at asking questions" (p. 1).

So I challenge you to allow students to ask questions more often. If you must be the question asker, I challenge you to pose this single, simple, beautiful question to your students—no matter the content, no matter the learning goal—"What are you wondering?"

NOW THAT'S A GOOD QUESTION!

How Would Technology Change the Story?

My students complete daily "activators." These questions, at the start of class, prepare students for the day's lesson by activating prior knowledge and encouraging them to make connections. During our unit on *The Outsiders*, I had students read an article about author S. E. Hinton's use of Twitter. The activator question was "Should the book be updated to include technology, and how would technology change the story?" They came up with great ideas: Would the characters smoke e-cigarettes? Would the Socs film the drowning and post it online? Would most of the harassment take place online and lead to fewer physical fights? They all agreed that Darry would sacrifice to get Ponyboy a computer, not only to help with his schoolwork, but also so Darry could take online college classes. These types of activities and questions demonstrate student higher-level thinking and show how well they have embraced the characterizations by the author. I often use the articles and questions to incorporate nonfiction with fiction, to tie in the Common Core State Standards.

—Kelley Nosel, English/language arts teacher, Wachusett Regional School District, Holden, Massachusetts

For more great questions suggested by our readers, see our "[Tell Me About](#)" column.

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